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The Process of Ethnographic Memoir Writing

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TTRA 2016 Cover Page

The Process of Ethnographic Memoir Writing

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TTRA 2016 Short Abstract

The Process of Ethnographic Memoir Writing

Methods in qualitative research

Abstract

This is a reflection on the process of developing an ethnographic memoir. This paper begins with a short background on ethnographic writing, followed by an explanation how a paper emerged from an ethnography workshop in a university classroom setting, and closes with a discussion of the content of the final paper. The resulting paper demonstrates how traveling elicited my inquiry into Won-Buddhism and shaped my relationship to the faith. Ethnographic memoir writing incorporates descriptive writing techniques used by authors in creative narrative writing. I show how principles of subjectivity, vulnerability, and partial truth play a role in this type of study, where the observer and the subject are one in the same.

TTRA 2016 Extended Abstract:
The Process of Ethnographic Memoir Writing

Introduction

This is a reflection on the process of developing an ethnographic memoir. I begin with a short discussion of ethnographic writing, then explain how my paper emerged from an ethnography workshop in a university classroom setting, and close with a discussion of the content of the resulting paper. The final paper relates how traveling elicited my inquiry into Won Buddhism and shaped my relationship to the faith, possible to the point of "conversion."

I use ethnographic memoir to examine my liminal state—as a person who is either being welcomed or recruited into what was once an alien Eastern religion to me, but has become a quite understandable way of life in a community where I feel like a family member, while still being filled with questions about what it means to be converted into this religion (Turner, 1971). I situate this phenomenon within the context of spiritual tourism, considering how traveling in one form or another has led to and strengthened my relationship to the faith.

I relate personal stories as a way of showing how this pathway toward spirituality emerged for me, following the sense-making model of Ruth Behar's vulnerable observer (Behar, 1996). Using a phenomenological approach, I use "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973) to relate my lived experience of entering into a religious tradition (Willson, McIntosh, & Zahra, 2013).

Background

Ethnography has a sustained, long-term engagement with place. Ruth Behar (1999) considers ethnography a search for connections, stories, and relationships. The practice of ethnography was once a dispassionate voice that was meant to be objective. The great early ethnographers made their strict observations of the "other" and kept their personal observations separate in a diary. Behar calls for the contemporary ethnographer to explore a living, breathing reality that is more art than science. Relating lived experience requires relating emotions and is situated within personal, ethical, political, and historical milieus.

Clifford Geertz (1973) went so far as saying that operationalism in the social sciences is dead in his seminal work, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. Building on Max Weber's notion that "man is suspended in a web of significance that he himself has spun" (paraphrased in Geertz, 1973, p. 5), ethnography is an interpretive inquiry in search of meaning. To him, a true analysis of the complexity of culture comes through the interpretation of the psychological structures by which we guide our behavior, and these underlying human intentions can only be described with the writing of "thick descriptions." For Geertz, meaning is inscribed through written discourse.

In the genre of ethnographic memoir, the researcher puts their own self and past at the center of the ethnography. The process is less participant observation and more toward participant description, or "I-witnessing" (Geertz, 1988, p.73). Interpreters also constantly construct themselves through the study of others (Clifford, 1986).

Imagery, metaphor, phraseology, and voice, techniques used by the creative writer but once eschewed by the social scientist now become central to the process of describing social phenomena. This type of writing moves beyond ethnographic realism, which is grounded in the

positivist terms of objects, facts, descriptions, inductions, generalizations, verification, and experiment (Polier & Roseberry, 1989; Tyler, 1986). In post-modern ethnography, language becomes its own object as the author creates the world as he or she sees it. The author makes sense of facts within the context of other facts, histories, and fields of power.

The use of literary processes to make sense of cultural phenomena acknowledges that the reality being described is only a partial truth (Clifford, 1986). Western positivistic science excludes expressive writing from its repertoire. Ethnographic memoir makes use of rhetoric, or, persuasive writing, examines emotions and speculations, and is subjective, ambiguous, and unstable. Ethnography is sometimes considered a true fiction, because, it is made and fashioned, and meaning is imposed as the facts are translated. The ethnographer cannot speak with automatic authority, is less concerned with anchoring ideas in some line of thought within the current paradigm, and has come to realize that new ideas are enmeshed in local practices; the ethnographer understands behavioral science to be a social process.

In the early days of ethnography, the data were the products (Tedlock, 1991). Now, particularly through auto-ethnography, the researcher is writing about themselves in interaction with others. Private lives become interwoven with public lives. Pasts become a prism through which phenomena are interpreted, such as when Renato Rosaldo (1989) was able to understand how grief can motivate a headhunter after Rosaldo's wife died in the field.

Methodology

With ethnographic memoir, the method for solving the core problem is completely reflexive. The researcher thinks back on the events of his or her life and how they relate to the problem at hand. The research question I started with for my study was, "How have I become immersed in the Won Buddhism religion, and how am I reacting to the potential of being actively converted into it?" I reflected on the events and places that led up to my entry into the religion and how the "conversion" was related to my travels.

For this methodology paper, I reflect on the processes that led to the formation of the ethnographic memoir that I eventually wrote: *Arriving at the Temple: Notes from Mid-Conversion*. The paper was written in a workshop setting for a university ethnographic writing graduate seminar. The process followed four discernable steps: First, I wrote an essay of what I considered to be an answer to the research question, written in the third person. Second, with guidance from my class instructor, Dr. Betsy Krause, I wrote three separate narratives about events that stood out in my essay of the "conversion" process. These events were written as first-person thick descriptions from the standpoint of a vulnerable observer (Behar, 1996). Third, I integrated the third and first-person writings into a single piece. Fourth, after realizing that the three vignettes were associated with the theme of travel, I related the experience with ethnographic spiritual tourism literature, which was appropriate for my ultimate audience—academic researchers.

Discussion

The journeys described in the resulting paper, a trip to Hawaii, a drive up a long Temple driveway, and a pilgrimage to Korea, have each contributed to my "conversion" into Won Buddhism, a religion that originated in Korea about 100 years ago. On the vacation to Hawaii, I began to realize that I needed to change the course of my life. That was probably not accidental.

According to Smith (1989), "a tourist is a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change" (p. 1) Vacations have an element of leisure time, which allow for abundant time for reflection. Away from the restrictions of my daily life, and facing my fiancé in the anti-structural space of the islands, my mind was free to reflect on a certain truth—that the life I was planning was not the right fit for me, no matter how much my rational mind tried to hold the pieces together. I needed to step outside my normal routine to make this realization. This trip served as a liminal state where my old status had begun to die (Turner, 1974).

The pilgrimage trip to Korea was also a stepping away from ordinary life. However, in this case, the differences led to more of a feeling of welcoming into a community rather than repulsion from a life pathway. The meaning and feeling of tight bonding with other participants, which Victor Turner called *communitas*, was more intense than I have felt from "normal" vacations, which themselves can be considered secular rituals (Graburn, Smith, & Brent, 2001). Buddhists speak of the Triple Gem that practitioners reach toward to receive help in their daily life: the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha (Sangharakshita, 1982). In Won Buddhism, the Buddha is represented by everything in the universe which can serve as a sacred teacher. The dharma is the "truth", which can also come from a myriad of sources. The sangha is the group of people who you practice with. This trip mostly served as a means of increasing my ties to the sangha after experiencing the kind affection showered upon us during our stay.

Interestingly, both tourism and mindfulness practice increase mental spaciousness. Rev. WonGong, who was the head priest at the temple I attended, recently asked me to edit one of her dharma talks on this subject. She wrote that, in order to respond well to a situation, it is best to have an uncluttered mind. The extra mental wiggle-room allows us the capacity to adjust our thoughts and actions and respond appropriately. The vacation or pilgrimage is a physical trip designed to give you freedom of mind, whereas being mindful is having the ability to step outside of oneself mentally.

Mindfulness retreats, often held at Buddhist temples and retreat centers, might be considered travel experiences that are even more likely to provoke Turner's (1969) anti-structure. By staying at a temple, visitors spend time doing what the monks and nuns do, which is "to find your true self." They get up very early and meditate through much of the day. The types of meditation include sitting, walking, and chanting meditation. They also practice ceremonial services, hold formal monastic meals, and conduct tea ceremonies. The concentration and quietude over extended periods of time lead to the "change" that the tourist seeks by breaking habits of everyday life. The Korea Tourism Organisation (2016) has in fact established a cultural tourism program that invites visitors to stay at Buddhist temples throughout the country. Their Temple Stay program showcases a representative aspect of Korean culture – the 1700-year-old Korean tradition of Buddhism.

This conversion described in the final paper has affected more than just my "spiritual" self. I have begun to embrace Korean culture, which is still so closely tied to the religion. I find myself using the Won Buddhism framework as a backdrop to understand academic concepts, such as the plasticity of self (Biehl, 2013). My overall psychological state feels more stable than it had been before I became engulfed in this process. Even so, I know of many people who practice no religion at all who seem very stable and happy, and often wonder about being indoctrinated into a particular "brand" of thinking. Adding to my confusion is the fact that the Won Buddhists respect all the major religions. The religion's founder, Ven. Sotesean states in the Principal Book

of Won Buddhism (2006) that "all the world's religions are essentially one" (p. 2). Similarly, I once heard the Dalai Lama say, "if Buddhism does not work for you, try something else." These statements that open the door for alternate ways of looking at the spiritual world lead me to trust this religion/philosophy as a tool for understanding myself and life in general, despite my questioning of what it means to be "converted."

Conclusions

In this paper, I reflect on the methodology of developing an ethnographic memoir. I used thick, narrative descriptions to give the reader the experience of being there in this exploration of how these travels affected what I consider to be a partial conversion to the Won Buddhist religion. The process involved an understanding of the principles of engaged and subjective writing, not unlike the process followed by a creative, non-academic writer. However, with ethnography there is an additional element of answering a specific research question within the context of the literature.

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